vela gótica, la tradición grotesca y la literatura del absurdo. Quizás esta novela se acerca más que ninguna otra de Mendoza a la literatura fantástica, en cuanto tiene esta de cuestionamiento de las bases racionales de la realidad y descubrimiento de la otra cara de lo real, como en el caso del absurdo fantástico de Lewis Carrol o el realismo mágico latinoamericano. La presencia de lo esotérico y lo laberíntico invoca la metafísica de Borges y Eco. La circularidad temporal (Borges) y la ironía cósmica (Cortázar) son dos conceptos organizadores del desorden de la novela. En una ironía absurda y circular, Fábregas parece condenado a repetir continuamente y de manera harto inconsciente coordenadas de tiempo y espacio, con diferentes personajes, todo se repite infinitamente, como el juego de espejos con que se abre y cierra la novela. De una manera cíclica, la mujer en sus múltiples manifestaciones novelescas siempre es la misma (María Clara, Madame Gestring, la doncella inocente, la monja); él a su vez es como Charlie, un inquieto aventurero cómodamente asentado, como los personajes que ve retratados en los cuadros. Irónicamente, Fábregas termina en el mismo sitio donde empezó, en una situación doméstica sedentaria, dedicado pragmáticamente al comercio. En realidad, el protagonista nunca ha salido del laberinto.

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Javier Marías. *Todas las almas.* Barcelona, Anagrama, 1989, 242 pp.

For the first time, Javier Marías has written a novel based directly upon his own vital experience, upon something lived as well as imagined or read: his two years as a visiting professor of Spanish language and literature at Oxford University (1983-85). Its protagonist and first-person narrator, a young Spaniard who now lives in Madrid, is married and has a son, recalls from a perpective of two-and-a-half years later his teaching stint in static, Medieval, self-absorbed Oxford, «la ciudad inhóspita y conservada en almíbar», where «nadie dice nunca nada a las claras», and only institutions matter, not people. Lonely in and alien to Oxford's labyrinthine network of snooping, spying, intrigue and malicious gossip, he tells «la historia de una perturbación» his own and that of the Oxonians, «unos perturbados». The poles of his existence

are few: an affair with the married but free-spirited humanist Clare Bayes, who unknowingly has been molded by a childhood tragedy; friendships with two outwardly strong but inwardly fragile professors who later die (the frank and cynical homosexual Cromer-Blake, possibly an AIDS victim, and the retired Toby Rylands, former British secret service agent and a revered teacher); and forays in search of old books, which raise the dead author John Gawsworth to a major «character». Each of these four figures is an enigma to be probed. Two symbolic points of orientation are the old books (representing the richness and density of the past, ever growing as it is discovered and understood) and the protagonist's wastebasket (the emptiness of the present, his solitude and sense of insignificance).

Nourishing these main lines are humorous scenes, misadventures and a gallery of types, forming a revealing brand of *costumbrismo* that is not peripheral but integral and essential: a «Cyclopean» Russian professor; Oxford's brilliant, highly educated beggars (ex-musicians, retired professors) and soccer punks: Alec «The Inquisitor» Dewar, passionate interrogator of defecting Soviet artists; Alan Marriott, founder of the Machen Company (cult to an obscure writer), who has never heard of Borges; a one-night stand with a townie, Muriel, really a plunge into the wholly impersonal world at Oxford's margins where professors mingle with rustics and all use false names. Above all, presided over by the aristocrat Lord Rymer in barbarian drunken lasciviousness, is the traditional «high table» or formal dinner, which Marías turns into a hilarious and cinematographic portrait of intellectuals' social ineptness and non-communication.

Structure and narrative technique — in fact, all elements — cohere in an intimate and admirable harmony in *Todas las almas*. If first-person narration offers to an author who dislikes finetuning a novel's linkages a greater fluidity and freedom (i.e. that of the narrator's consciousness: the character can be blamed for any structural flaws), it can also pose risks and limitations. Deeply aware of the possibilities of the narrating voice and the workings of mind and memory, especially insofar as they can be used to render the usual unusual and to fashion an enticing uncertainty and ambiguity that evoke far more than is stated on any page, Marias has avoided all pitfalls. External atmosphere and internal dislocation fuse in the multifaceted *perturbación* (disconcert, dis-

tress, confusion, profound alienation). The result is an apparently meandering but really carefully constructed lyrical discourse of constant reiterations, in which moods suddenly shift and motifs subtly change valence. Its long sentences pile clause upon clause to simulate the flow of consciousness and memory, in a constant time-negating present (like Oxford's) that mulls over the past and its meanings, and even includes parenthetical commentaries. It has, in effect, two narrators: the experiencer, bewildered, and the rememberer, reflective, more comprehensive and now reintegrated into Spanish reality. The second one supplies the parenthetical remarks, a sort of afterthought, amplification or revision. Arising from this arrangement are basic, all-important contrasts: between the narrator's Hispanic or Mediterranean vitality and hospitality and the Oxonians' Anglo-Saxon aloofness, severity, and reserve; between his former happy childhood and their practice of sending children away to school; between his use of clear, direct speech and their deliberate ambivalence; between his optimism (or vigorous Iberian moral health) and their «sensación de descenso», that world-weary decadent spirit of dejection which he finds even in the eyes of Clare Bayes's teenage son, Eric. In sum, there is the suggestion that he, the narrator, is alive while they are dead in life — so that «all the souls» of the novel's title (based on All Souls College) are virtually lifeless. Thus the main characters seem undeveloped but convincing because they are distanced, unknowable and vulnerable. The seventeen unnumbered chapters of varying length move slowly and seem unstructural until the sixteenth and best one, a psychological rather than dramatic climax. It brings the various strands together, revealing to the reader's as well as to the narrator's «pensamiento que unifica y asocia y establece demasiados vínculos» the union of Clare's mother and Gawsworth, source and explanation of so many things. A striking symbol of the novel's complex form and tone may be the figure — with which it symetrically opens and closes — of the senile college doorman, Will, whose inability to distinguish epochs and identities seems to suggest the narrator's inner dislocations and summarize the precarious contingency of reality.

Unquestionably, this is Javier Marías's finest novel to date.

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